

## FLY REELS

### Their Origin, History, Selection and Use

By MORT HUNTER

WHILE fly-rods are a subjective issue which can involve anglers in heated arguments, fly-reels invoke no such partisan reaction. This is somewhat puzzling because today's reels combine old-world craftsmanship and modern technology in highly functional designs and the angler has a wide variety from which to choose. To be a discerning consumer he must not only be aware of what is available but what best suits his specific needs.

Perhaps the earliest record of a fishing reel is a painting titled *Angler on a Wintry Lake*, attributed to Ma Yuan, a famous Chinese artist of the Sung Dynasty in the 12th century. The painting can be seen in the Tokyo Museum and unmistakably shows the angler using a rod on top of which is mounted a reel.

The first reference to a reel in the Western World was in a book by the Englishman Thomas Barker, *The Art of Angling*, published in 1651, and they were in common use for salmon and trout fishing during the 1700's, usually being fashioned from wood such as walnut.

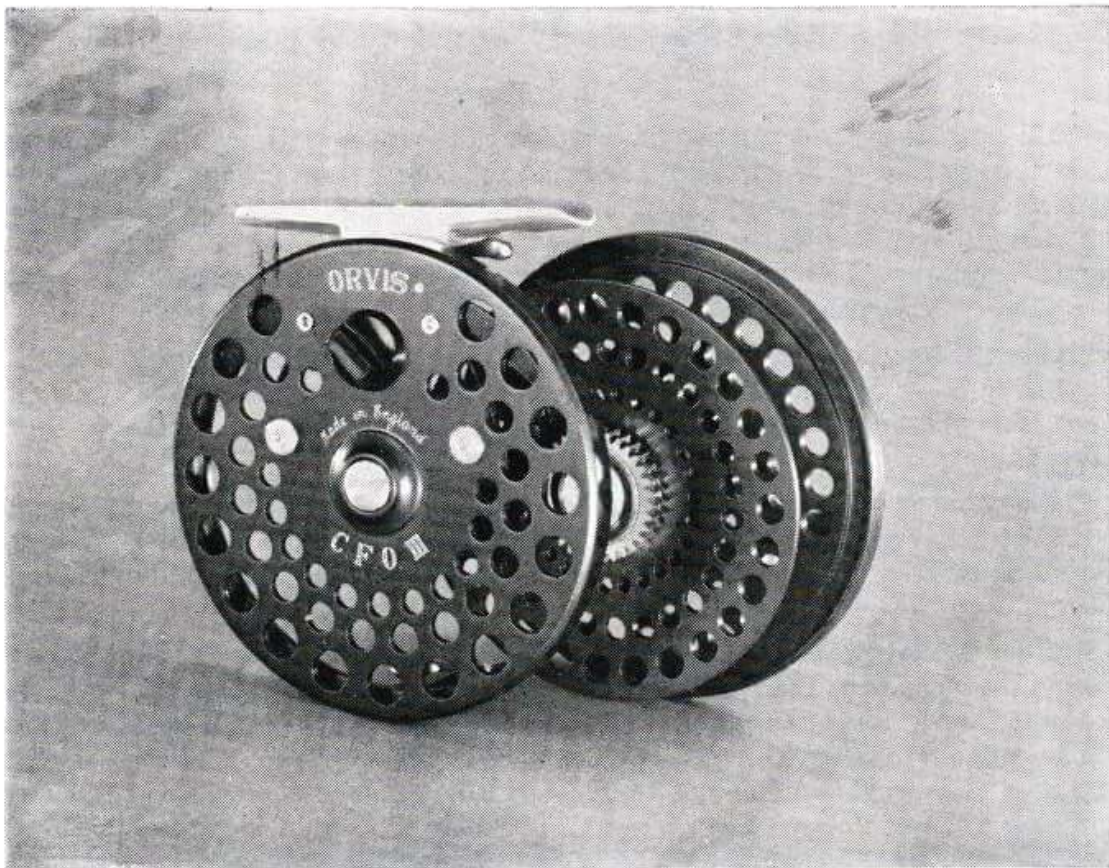
But the modern trout reel had its genesis in the 19th century. The longest surviving fly-reel is the American Pflueger Medalist which has its origin in the 1850's—a rugged, long-lasting work-horse which is made of metal stampings. With reasonable care a Medalist will go on forever, but it lacks the feel, finesse and lightness of the more advanced die-cast reels such as the Hardy. One of the most significant of the early reel manufacturers was the American firm of Thomas Conroy which produced the first aluminium reels in 1878—although Hardy had produced prototype eight-inch aluminium salmon reels to the specifications of the Duke of Roxburghe a few years earlier than this.

However, the most important occurrences in the development of the modern fly-reel were the founding of the English firm, Hardy Bros., in 1872, and the patenting in 1874 by the American, Charles F. Orvis, of the first ventilated fly-reel. William and John Hardy advertised in the *Alnwick Mercury* on July 26, 1872, that they had taken premises in Paikes Street, Alnwick, "where they intend to conduct a business as gunsmiths, whitesmiths etc. and hope, by prompt attention to all orders and first-rate workmanship to obtain a share of the public patronage which they most respectfully solicit". The availability of a number of skilled cabinet-makers who had just been declared redundant resulted in the new firm building split-cane rods; the manufacture of reels being a later enterprise which awaited the advent of a younger brother, Forster Hardy, who was to join the firm several years after its founding. Regrettably Hardy has recently ceased production of the split-cane rods on which its world-wide reputation was founded, but it is fair to say that Hardy is today the most prolific builder of quality fly-reels.

Two years later, in 1874 on the other side of the Atlantic, another talented fishing tackle manufacturer, Charles F. Orvis, received a patent on a new design in fly-reels which is now regarded as a milestone in American fishing tackle history. Unlike other

reels of the time, it was narrow, perforated, and was mounted upright rather than sideways on the rod—a major breakthrough which made it the forefather of modern fly-reels. That early reel is echoed in its modern equivalent, the exquisite but expensive Orvis CFO, which was the first reel to offer an exposed rim for the application of palming drag.

The introduction of the Hardy Perfect, the most famous of all fly-reels, in 1892 was what put Hardy on the road to its modern pre-eminence and elements of the drag



**The Orvis CFO.** Christened in memory of Charles F. Orvis and made by Hardy, it is regarded as one of the finest fresh-water fly reels in the world. Cast from a special aluminium alloy giving an exceptional strength to weight ratio and further ventilated for greater lightness, it has a drag system which will allow a trout to run against a fragile 7x tippet while preventing spool over-runs that mean lost fish.

*Photograph per Mort Hunter*

system which it used are found in most modern fly-reels. Machined to extremely close tolerances, fitted with stainless steel ball bearings for near frictionless operation, it has, except for a brief period, remained in production since then. A modern classic, it has one great drawback—weight. Even the smallest,  $3\frac{1}{8}$  inch Perfect, weighs  $5\frac{1}{2}$  ounces. Today Hardy derives more than half of its current income from the production of fly-reels, many for such American companies as Orvis and Scientific Anglers. With the exception of a few parts such as ball bearings, Hardy produces most of its reel components at its factory in Willowburn, Alnwick.

The most important breakthrough in modern times was the development some two decades ago of the aluminium alloys which brought about a drastic reduction in reel weight and led to the introduction of the famous Hardy Lightweight series of fly-reels. Another weight reduction came about through experiments by Orvis. Following



**The Berkeley Specialist, an ingenious and ultra-light combination of traditional features and modern technology. With its pliable plastic spools in a single-piece, rugged aluminium frame, the Specialist is easily converted to left-hand retrieve, has three drag positions and incorporated a smooth-acting thumb brake.**

*Photograph per Mort Hunter*

the lead of famed American reel maker Stanley Bogdan they discovered that the outer rim of the reel frame could be done away with, and this cageless design is now featured in the Orvis CFO and the new Hardy Viscount. The one-sided frame permits quick and easy spool changes with no line pinching or tangling, and the exposed spool rim allows easy palming and precise control of long-running fish. The next step in the reel-makers' quest for those elusive and often mutually exclusive qualities, strength and lightness, was the inclusion of plastics and similar materials in their designs. One of the first such reels to come on the market was the Cortland Graphite reel, which is some 30 per cent lighter than equivalent diameter aluminium alloy reels. But the model I bought proved disappointing. It lacks that indefinable feeling of quality so dear to the heart of the fly fisherman and has other shortcomings as well. The tolerances between the reel cage and the flange of the spool face mean that line gets trapped in the gap and the carbon graphite pawl of the drag system, which bears against a metal spring, is being chipped away steadily.

Similarly disappointing was a more recent arrival, the British Intrepid Dragonfly reel, which is a thermoplastic composite. Do such materials then lack a future in reel design and manufacture? Far from it, for the reel which I feel is most suited to South African conditions and an ideal compromise between lightness, quality, ruggedness and reasonable cost is a cunning combination of a die-cast aluminium frame with an extruded, high-impact plastic spool which won't dent or crack. This reel, the Berkley Specialist, originated in American prairie country—the town of Spirit Lake, Iowa, to be precise. Other modern fly-reels are both labour-intensive and metal-intensive, and the Berkley Specialist was designed from scratch to obviate such expensive manufacturing procedures. The result is that this reel costs less than the price of a spare spool of other top-quality reels, and the purchase price includes a tool and spare-part kit. The corrosion-resistant aluminium frame consists of an outer rim supported by three substantial spokes, but the reel's most outstanding feature is its plastic spool, which is incredibly tough. The spool is rugged, corrosion-resistant and pliable, and I find the easiest and most convincing way to demonstrate that it can take more than its share of abuse is to hurl it forcefully against the shop floor.

Early books on fly-fishing recommended that the correct ratio of reel-to-rod weight to achieve the correct "balance" would be achieved by a reel weighing some 50 per cent more than the rod. Thus a 4 oz. rod would require a 6 oz. reel, but the advent of lightweight aerospace rod materials such as carbon fibre made such a formula impractical. Nowadays the consensus is that the reel should be as light as possible and in this regard I can do no better than quote an extract from *The Ring of the Rise* by that brilliant and innovative American angler, Vincent Marinaro.

"In 1889 R. C. Leonard, a tournament caster, stepped to the platform without a reel on his rod and simply coiled the line at his feet. With that abbreviated rig he proceeded to smash all existing distance records, including his own, by a wide margin. It was a shocking thing to competitors and spectators alike. It was a momentous discovery from which not only tournament casters but fishermen as well should have profited. That early-day pioneer discovered an extremely important principle in rod dynamics. It amounts to this: That the caster must move the useless weight below the hand as well as the useful weight above the hand, that the removal of dead weight below the hand helped to overcome inertia more quickly, increasing the tip speed, thus imparting a greater velocity to the projectile or fly line. It should have been a valuable lesson to everyone, but it wasn't. It remained only among the tournament casters for many years.

"If you examine the books and catalogs of those early days you will discover that manufacturers and fishermen-writers discussed very learnedly and extensively such things as 'fulcrumpoint', 'counterpoise', 'balancing the flyrod', and 'letting the rod do the work', none of which has any merit whatsoever. Not until very recently has there been an awareness of this valid principle. It is evidenced by the availability of numerous fine, very lightweight reels on the market today. In view of this trend I should not be discussing this subject at all, except for the fact that I am frequently surprised by the comments of writers and the recommendations of suppliers or manufacturers prescribing a specific size and weight of reel to balance a particular rod. There can be no such thing as balance in a fly rod. There can never be a fixed 'fulcrum point'. Every inch that the cast is lengthened or shortened changes the alleged balance and every unnecessary ounce in an unnecessarily heavy reel dampens and degrades the cast.

"If you wish to explore this a little further, you can try an experiment as I did some years ago. If you have or can borrow enough reels, let us say in two-ounce increments, all the way from the lightest, about two ounces, to something about eight

or nine ounces, you will have enough to make the experiment. Use the same weight of line on the same fly rod for all trials. With the lightest reels the casts are sharply and cleanly delivered flat out with enough velocity to turn over the leaders. You also get a tighter front bow if you want it. As the reels get heavier there is a noticeable lagging in the forward loop until finally with the heaviest reel there is decided dropping of the loop, and probably a failure to turn over the leader properly. This effect is most pronounced on long casts. And consider how much worse it could be with those reels that were manufactured with a hollow arbor into which the purchaser was urged to pour lead pellets through a little trapdoor in order to correct the balance of his fly rod.

"You can suit yourself about these matters but for me there is only one sound system and that is: Use the lightest possible reel of good quality and adequate capacity no matter how long or heavy the rod may be. There is no problem about getting quality and as for capacity, you have immense control over that, too! Accordingly, one of my very best combinations is a tiny two-ounce reel on a nine-foot rod. Adequate capacity is obtained by using a weight-forward line. Make a cast long enough to be handled comfortably by you and your favourite trout rig. Cut off all the running line remaining on the reel and fill the reel with fine Dacron backing line; a superb material, far better than anything obtainable in the old days. You will have enough capacity to handle the biggest trout that swims and additionally a backing that can function as a shooting line if you really need a few extra feet."



**The most famous fly reel in the world—the Hardy Perfect—which was first introduced in 1891. It is made of high duty hiduminium alloy in three main parts; drum, frame and revolving plate. The ball-bearings, which make it almost frictionless, and the spindle are made of stainless steel. The centre bush is bronze and the classic revolving agate line-guide is mounted in a German silver housing.**

*Photograph per Mort Hunter*

The lightest practical reel on the market today is the jewel-like Orvis CFO II which weighs a mere 2 oz. with a diameter of  $2\frac{1}{2}$  in. But its limited line capacity makes it suitable for three and four weight lines only. The Orvis Battenkill range, made of magnesium rather than aluminium alloy and liberally drilled, is the lightest reel for its diameter on the market, followed closely by the Orvis CFO, the Berkley Specialist and the latest cageless Hardy Viscount. Other excellent reels are the Shakespeare Beaulite and the famous Speedex which is geared at 2:1 so it really retrieves line fast. These reels are tough and not expensive. At the bottom of the ladder come the pressed steel reels from Japan—cheap and fine for the first season or so, they have design flaws and the drag mechanism is not designed for gentle adjustment normally. An 'on' or 'off' affair.

Now that you have locked your cane Hardys away with the Purdey perhaps you should do the same with the CFO and go fishing with a 'cheaper' reel—funny thing how the sound of line coming off a CFO can be recognised on any trout stream. Oh well, buy two and then enjoy the pleasure of the finest made, knowing that you have a spare—just in case you fall and dent it!